



FOOD FIGHTS! THE ETHICS OF DIETARY DIFFERENCE AT THE DINNER TABLE

Megan A. Dean, Assistant
Professor, Department of
Philosophy, MSU

North American Coordinator,
Culinary Mind: Center for
Philosophy of Food

Images from Unsplash.com

THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER?

Blog post by Faith Durand (2012)

Graphic by Amy Sly for *Buzzfeed*

kitchn

Kitchn's Instagram Account is a Webby Nominee and You Can Help Us Win — [VOTE NOW!](#)

ALLERGIES | DINNER FOR A CROWD | ETIQUETTE

PEOPLE

The Most Challenging Dinner Guest Ever: And 5 Delicious Meals To Feed Them

By FAITH DURAND • Updated Jun 5, 2019

GLUTEN INTOLERANT

ALLERGIC TO NUTS

LACTOSE INTOLERANT

ALLERGIC TO EGGS

VEGAN

🍴 = THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER

(Image credit: Amy Sly/Buzzfeed)

THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER?

Commenter Cynthia Bertelsen: **“I must say I long for the days, when people came to dinner, they ate what the frazzled cook placed in front of them”** (Durand 2012).

— THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER?

“I had a dinner party recently and **the Ozempic people didn't even pretend to eat the food,** ... ‘Like dude, cut it and push it around at least! **They just didn't eat and I thought it was so rude**’” (Kim, 2023).

— THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER?

When eating with others, a participant with food intolerances explained: “**I’m afraid I’ll just eat it** [the food that makes them ill] and then I think to myself, OK, **for the next few days I’m just going to have to hide away quietly**” (Nettleton et al. 2010, 296).

— THE WORST DINNER GUEST EVER?

“In an effort to communicate the severity of my allergy and the risk of a potential reaction, I might alienate the host by appearing to question their cleaning and cooking practices”;
“As a disability studies scholar committed to universal access and accommodations, **I nevertheless fail to accurately express my allergy so I can avoid the risk of offending the host**” (Gill 2023, 31-32).

— THE WORST DINNER *HOST* EVER?

Commenter Cynthia Bertelsen: “I must say I long for the days, when people came to dinner, they ate what the frazzled cook placed in front of them” (Durand 2012).

- Commenter westfield replies: “Really? **I have Celiac disease. Would you serve me bread and say I ought to eat it because you are frazzled? How is that hospitality? If having guests frazzles you then you should not have them**” (Durand 2012).

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

What is behind these tensions, judgments, and guests risking self-harm?

Not just a few people being jerks or masochists.

→ **I suggest that guests and hosts have ethical responsibilities to one another and that dietary differences can make it difficult for both parties to fulfill these responsibilities, leading to tension, judgment, and the potential for harm.**

→ **Understanding these responsibilities and the ways that dietary differences can create barriers to fulfilling them can help us eat better together.**

THE PLAN

1. What are the ethical responsibilities of hosts and guests to one another?
2. How do dietary differences create barriers to fulfilling these responsibilities?
3. How does this analysis help us avoid, mitigate, or overcome these barriers so we can eat better together?



1. THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF HOSTS AND GUESTS

HOSPITABLE HOSTS AND GOOD GUESTS

Classical hospitality: good hospitality is *unconditional*

- *The Odyssey*

Contemporary domestic hospitality: a bit more modest

- Hosts and guests have responsibilities to one another, which include:
 - **Hosts:** serve safe, palatable, appropriate food to guests
 - *Don't harm the guests!*
 - **Guests:** demonstrate gratitude and an “openness, flexibility, and a willingness to adjust” to what the host offers (Boisvert and Heldke, 29)

HOSPITABLE HOSTS AND GOOD GUESTS

Boisvert and Heldke: in the US context, there has been a recent shift in responsibility to be “open” and “adjust”

- Hosts expected to adjust their menu to guest diets, rather than guests adjusting to whatever “the frazzled cook” serves them
 - But this cannot be unconditional: some guests have food allergies or other conditions that mean food can kill or harm them; some guests have niche diets that would create significant and unreasonable burdens for hosts
 - The easy case: if the food will harm/kill the guest, the host has to adjust

THE VALUE OF SHARED MEALS

Stohr: Shared meals are occasions structured by etiquette conventions that enable us to do important moral work

- Shared meals have “specific aims and goods to be achieved” (Stohr 2018, 703): connection, care, celebration, commemoration, sharing traditions and culture, creating or reinforcing community, etc.
 - There are other ways to achieve these goods but shared meals are a common and generally accessible way to do it

THE VALUE OF SHARED MEALS

Stohr: hosting a shared meal or accepting an invitation to a meal entails responsibilities to contribute to the success of the occasion, including:

- Follow the appropriate etiquette, whatever it is
 - Ex. wear jeans and eat pizza with your hands sitting on the couch, sit at the table in your suit and use the proper fork, bring something to share to a potluck, don't bring your own food to a formal plated dinner, etc.

THE VALUE OF SHARED MEALS

Stohr: hosting a shared meal or accepting an invitation to a meal entails responsibilities to contribute to the success of the occasion, including:

- Overlook one another's shortcomings as hosts/guests
 - Ex. If the food tastes bad, pretend it is tasty; if the guest shows up improperly dressed, don't call attention to it
- Fulfilling these responsibilities are a way to contribute to the success of the occasion and demonstrate respect for others



2. DIETARY DIFFERENCES AND BARRIERS AT THE DINNER TABLE



DIETARY DIFFERENCES

A guest committed to a different diet than their host for any number of reasons, including food allergy or intolerance, medication side effects or interactions, other health or fitness concerns, ethical or religious beliefs, strong preferences, etc.

→ I will focus on health-related dietary differences, where the diet aims to protect the guest from relatively immediate harm (what Heldke and Boisvert say is the “easy” case)

LESS-THAN-GOOD GUESTS

In order to ensure they can eat food that is safe and appropriate for themselves, guests with dietary differences may need to:

- Ask hosts about the planned menu and food preparation
- Request that certain ingredients be left out of the meal entirely
- Ask to review food packaging and/or recipes
- Ask about ingredients or preparation of food that has been served
- Turn down offered food or leave it uneaten on their plate
- Ask to serve themselves before everyone else
- Bring their own personal food to a shared meal
- Excuse themselves from the table during a meal
- Leave an event early and/or without eating

LESS-THAN-GOOD GUESTS

- These actions violate (or appear to violate) many of the guest's responsibilities:
 - they may seem to reflect a lack of gratitude, failure to be open, flexible, and willing to adjust to the host's offerings;
 - they violate common etiquette norms for many types of events (especially more formal ones);
 - they can be seen as a refusal to "overlook" the host's shortcomings (i.e., their potential failure to prepare and offer safe, appropriate food).
 - In short: guests with dietary differences are likely to be judged as bad guests for taking steps to ensure they have safe, appropriate food at a shared meal

LESS-THAN-GOOD GUESTS

This can create internal tension for the guest: protecting themselves physically (or their moral or religious integrity) vs. avoiding seeming like (or being?) a bad guest

- Some will choose to risk self-harm rather than be a “bad guest”
 - The “I’m afraid I’ll just eat it” guest with food intolerances; the “I underplay my food allergy” guest
- Many people *really* don’t want to be bad guests!

LESS-THAN-HOSPITABLE HOSTS

- Dietary differences can raise *practical* issues for serving safe, palatable, appropriate food to guests
 - Kitchen or home not equipped to support some dietary differences (ex. nut-free, kosher)
 - Cost of food, time and labour to procure and prepare unfamiliar foods, plan a new menu
 - Food work is often distributed unequally within families, bulk often falls on women → changing the menu or adding dietary constraints to the menu can add additional labour to already overburdened people
 - (Maybe this is why Cynthia is so frazzled?)

LESS-THAN-HOSPITABLE HOSTS

Dietary differences can also raise *epistemic* issues for hosts

- Epistemic → relating to knowledge, knowers, knowing
 - Lack of knowledge about dietary differences and/or reasons for them
 - Lack of knowledge re: food preparation techniques, food safety for different diets
 - Common ignorance and misunderstandings about dietary differences (especially food allergy, intolerances, Celiac, etc.)

LESS-THAN-HOSPITABLE HOSTS

- Hosts may try their best but nonetheless fail to serve safe, appropriate foods due to these practical and epistemic issues (and they may not even realize they are failing!)
 - There is good reason for guests to be concerned that even the most well-intentioned host may serve them unsafe or inappropriate food

SO WHY NOT JUST TALK ABOUT IT?

- Seems like the easy solution is better communication
- Guests should be open about their needs and explain their reasons for “violating” good guest expectations, hosts should be open about their own capacities and limitations regarding dietary differences
- Yes!
 - But the social context around dietary differences – particularly those relating to food allergy, intolerances, and other “gut issues” (ex. celiac, IBS) – can make this difficult

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

Prevalent doubts and disbelief about the reality and/or severity of food hypersensitivities

- “I have two friends who have developed gluten allergies in their late 20s during this gluten trend. . . . I don’t understand how you managed 28 years eating all foods you are now “allergic” to. I mean, I saw you down a 12 pack of cheap beer better than me” (Commenter rb43 in Durand 2012)
- One participant in Nettleton et al.’s study suggests that people who claim food intolerances just want “attention” (Nettleton et al. 2010, 298).
- “You’re never sure if it’s just ‘cos they don’t like it or whether they actually can’t [eat that food]” (Nettleton et al 2010, 298).

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

Prevalent doubts and disbelief about the reality and/or severity of food hypersensitivities

- Young people with celiac disease report that others accuse them of “making it up” (Olsson et al. 2009, 982).
- “Most cases of (self-) reported food allergies lack scientific rationale” (Haeusermann 2015, 370).
- “Many patients believe that they are allergic or intolerant to certain foods, solely on the basis of self persuasion” (Ortolani and Pastorello 2006, 473).

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

Yes, some people who believe they have food hypersensitivities may be wrong about that. However, food issues are epistemically tricky things:

- Food allergy is difficult to diagnose, can develop or fade over time
- Food intolerances are variable – reactions can depend on recent diet
- Non-food circumstances impact “gut issues” and can modulate how someone reacts to a food (ex. stress + IBS = more severe reactions)
- Sometimes it is not clear to the eater what foods they are sensitive to; they may be mistaken about the culprit food, but nonetheless have a legitimate issue

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

Testimonial injustice: occurs when an audience fails to give a person's testimony an appropriate level of credibility on the basis of an identity prejudice

- Due to a prejudice (like “most food allergies are fake”) testimony from members of the group is disbelieved or taken less seriously than it would be otherwise (Buchman, Ho, and Goldberg 2017, 35).

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

Testimonial injustice directed at people with food allergies, intolerances, etc. occurs in a context where the person's testimony carries particular epistemic importance

- Most symptoms are private (occurring internally or in private locations like bathrooms) and taboo to discuss in public, especially at meals
- Hosts are not their guests' medical providers (or, at least, aren't acting as such when hosting), don't have access to medical records
- Who is best situated to know the truth about the guest's needs? The guest themselves.

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

The repeated experience of testimonial injustice can lead to **testimonial smothering**

- “If a speaker recognizes that an audience... is unlikely to give her adequate uptake, she'll choose not to speak” (McKinnon 2016, 442).
- Dryden notes a general reluctance to “speak up” about gut issues (2021, 17)
- Some teens report concealing their celiac disease from others to avoid disbelief and accusations that they are “making it up,” or “being self-important” (Olsson et al. 2009, 982)

BUT YOU AREN'T *REALLY* ALLERGIC...

- This context of doubts and disbelief goes some way to explaining why judgment and tension can arise between host and guests, even when people are well-intentioned
- Socially prevalent doubts and disbelief may inform hosts' reactions to guests or guests may worry that hosts do not believe or fully understand them
- Guests may be reluctant to be open about their needs due to prior testimonial injustice and the desire to be a “good guest”



3. HOW TO EAT BETTER TOGETHER (OR NOT!)

HOW TO EAT BETTER TOGETHER

- Transparency about needs, limitations
 - Hosts can preemptively ask guests about their dietary needs, try to counter testimonial smothering
 - Guests should be as transparent as possible about their needs, limitations, risk tolerance, etc.; give hosts the benefit of the doubt
- Epistemic humility and responsibility
 - Hosts should defer to guests about their food needs, believe them, ask for clarification or further information if needed

HOW TO EAT BETTER TOGETHER

- Acknowledge and address practical challenges
 - Guests should be aware of the labour involved with learning about and preparing a meal for dietary differences, offer to help through education, shared labour, bringing a dish, etc.
- Acknowledge these conversations might be awkward and uncomfortable
 - Expectations are being challenged or violated, risking judgment on both sides and potential harm for guests
 - Guests with dietary differences may be bringing the weight of past bad experiences with them; hosts should try not to take that personally

OR NOT!

- Shared meals have “specific aims and goods to be achieved” (Stohr 703): connection, care, celebration, commemoration, sharing traditions and culture, creating or reinforcing community, etc.
- **There are other ways to achieve these goods**
 - If dietary differences (and/or the inability to successfully accommodate them) mean a shared meal won't work but you still want to connect, celebrate, etc. → try a different means to the same end: a walk, a coffee, a movie, a sports game, the theatre, board games, book club, etc.

IN SUM

- Dietary differences can create barriers for both hosts and guests at shared meals re: fulfilling their ethical responsibilities to one another
- Understanding this can help defuse, mitigate some of these barriers
 - But sometimes, a shared meal just won't work
- Shared meals are occasions for morally valuable work, and it is good to participate in them if we can; but sometimes, looking beyond the meal is the best way to connect, care, celebrate, commemorate, or whatever else we are trying to do together





**THANK
YOU!**

Contact me at:

- deanmeg2@msu.edu
- <https://meganadean.com>

Check out our Culinary Mind: Center for Philosophy of food virtual speaker series at <https://culinarymind.org>

SELECTED SOURCES

- Boisvert, Raymond D., and Lisa M. Heldke. 2016. *Philosophers at Table*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Buchman, Daniel Z., Anita Ho, and Daniel S. Goldberg. 2017. "Investigating Trust, Expertise, and Epistemic Injustice in Chronic Pain." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 14.1: 31–42.
- Dryden, Jane. 2021. "Food Choices and Gut Issues." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 7.3.
- Durand, Faith. 2012. "The Most Challenging Dinner Guest Ever: And 5 Delicious Meals To Feed Them." *The Kitchn*. April 12.
- Gill, Michael. 2023. *Allergic Intimacies: Food, Disability, Desire, and Risk*. Fordham University Press.
- Haeusermann, Tobias. 2015. "I Can't Eat That: The Sociology behind the Rise in Food Allergies and Intolerances." *Current Sociology* 63.3: 369–86.
- Kim, Leena. 2023. "How to Behave at a Dinner Party on Ozempic." Food. *Town & Country*, December 7.
- McKinnon, Rachel. 2016. "Epistemic Injustice." *Philosophy Compass* 11.8: 437–46.
- Nettleton, Sarah, Brian Woods, Roger Burrows, and Anne Kerr. 2010. "Experiencing Food Allergy and Food Intolerance: An Analysis of Lay Accounts." *Sociology* 44, no. 2: 289–305.
- Olsson, Cecilia, Phil Lyon, Agneta Hornell, et al.. 2009. "Food That Makes You Different: The Stigma Experienced by Adolescents with Celiac Disease." *Qualitative Health Research* 19.7: 976–84.
- Ortolani, Claudio, and Elide A. Pastorello. 2006. "Food Allergies and Food Intolerances." *Best Practice & Research Clinical Gastroenterology, Nutritional and Dietary Consequences of Gastrointestinal Diseases*, 20.3: 467–83.
- Stohr, Karen. 2011. *On Manners*. New York: Routledge.
- ---. 2018. "The Etiquette of Eating." In *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*, edited by Anne Barnhill, Tyler Doggett, and Mark Budolfson, 700–721. New York: Oxford University Press.